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Ministry



Sisters and residents discuss plans for a musical at Jyothis Bhavan, a short-stay home in Kochi, southern Kerala, India, for young transgender people hoping to integrate into the social mainstream. (Binu Alex)



by Binu Alex

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Sr. Amal Rose remains surprisingly calm as tempers run high at Jyothis Bhavan, a short-stay home for young transgender people hoping to integrate into India's social mainstream. The home is in Kochi, in southern Kerala, a state known for its sandy beaches, green hills and balmy weather.

Rose belongs to the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, which runs Jyothis Bhavan ("luminous house" in Sanskrit) for transgender people.

The home welcomes residents of all ages, but most are 18-25 and struggling to find a way forward in life after declaring their gender identity and facing rejection from their families and society. Many require post-surgical care.

It is an unfamiliar mission area for the nuns of Kerala's first indigenous congregation for women, founded as a cloistered community.



Mother of Carmel Sr. Amal Rose (Binu Alex)

Three nuns manage this short-stay facility, which currently houses nine transgender people, though it can house 21. Two staff members and a cook/housekeeper assist the nuns.

Dealing with friction among residents is a daily task, but the nuns are trained to address such issues with sensitivity and caution as emotions run high.

Adjusting her head veil, Rose said, "They are also God's children. If we don't take care of them, who else will?"

India has some 480,000 transgender people, according to the 2011 census. Indian society discriminates against transgender people, viewing them as abnormal or deviant. A 2014 survey in Kerala revealed that 90% of transgender students dropped out of school after becoming subjects of social ridicule.

A lack of education, jobs and acceptance forces many of them into begging or sex work, where they face physical and emotional violence and abuse, including sexual assault.

The nuns founded Jyothis Bhavan in 2022 as a short-term stay facility for transgender people with partial funding from the state's Social Justice Department. However, the project began as an alternative educational center for transgender dropouts in 2016, where students were allowed to spend the night. At the time, the nuns did not offer students a facility to bathe and eat.

"We added food and love so they feel at home," Rose said, smiling.

The nuns do not impose strict rules, encouraging residents to participate in activities that interest them.

Sr. Navya Maria, a general counselor in charge of the congregation's media department, brought a team of video and sound experts during afternoon tea time to record a music album for their social media channel, CMC Vision.

For the music video, the scriptwriter and songwriter is Rena V.S., who has been at the home for more than five months.



Rena V.S., one of the residents of Jyothis Bhavan, a short-stay home for young transgender people (Binu Alex)

Until age 16, Rena was known by her male name, which she refuses to divulge. Her family and society assigned her a male identity, but she secretly embraced a female one.

To resolve this "unending dilemma," Rena left home and landed on the streets of Coimbatore, a city in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, about a four-hour drive from Kochi.

With no place to stay, she begged on the streets.

"I ended up being cheated by thugs and landed at Jyothis Bhavan," Rena recalled.

A similar 2016 incident in Kerala inspired the nuns to bring the short-term stay facility to life.

Sister Teslin saw a transgender person standing alone and sobbing at a bus stop in Kochi. When she learned the person had been there for 48 hours and had nowhere to go, she took her to the alternative learning center the nuns managed before they started the home.

She proposed to her superiors the idea of setting up a shelter for transgender people. "I never thought I would get such a quick response," the 58-year-old nun said.

Once admitted to the home, residents have six months to obtain the required documents, join an educational institution or land a job.

"We want more and more people to use the facility and try to settle down in life," the nun said.

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She said they "still have miles to go" before achieving their goal of helping all transgender people who need such help in Kerala, where the 2014 state government survey counted 25,000 transgender people. Reliable statistics for homeless transgender people in the area do not exist.

The nuns work to make residents aware that sex work cannot sustain them in the long term and encourage them to find stable jobs and lead normal lives.

Change is slowly happening, with the federal government enacting a law in 2019 to protect the rights of transgender people and create facilities for them.

Kerala has been leading this change. Eight years ago, when the city started Kochi Metro, its rapid rail network, operators decided to employ transgender people. Many now work on trains and have pursued other employment opportunities in the city.

Rose said the sisters work with government officials, sensitizing and motivating them to issue transgender residents documents like birth, school and college certificates to help them pursue further education and qualify for jobs.

When the nuns started the home, they informed their neighbors about the project to gain their acceptance and support for residents.



Sr. Navya Maria is a general counselor and head of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel's media department at Jyothis Bhavan, a short-stay home for young transgender people in Kochi, southern Kerala, India. (Binu Alex)

Sister Teslin recalled that they approached three-wheeled-rickshaws and state-run public transport bus drivers, asking them to treat transgender people like normal passengers.

S. Prabhakaran, an auto-rickshaw driver who waits for passengers near the home, said the nuns' efforts have paid off.

"We used to ridicule them. But thanks to the nuns, they are like any other passengers to us," Prabhakaran said.

Gopika, a transgender resident, often hires Prabhakaran's auto-rickshaw to go to work. Draped in a traditional Indian saree, she works as a freelance makeup artist in

Kerala's movie industry and volunteers for an organization helping other transgender people in the city.

"We can walk around freely and take any mode of transportation. There is not a single hostile stare," said Gopika, who wears a rosary around her neck but is not a Christian.

"We do not have any god," said Rena, who is working on an undergraduate course in the traditional Indian dance form, Bharata Natyam. "We gave up religion along with gender. It is easy as it requires no painful surgery."

Her goal is to complete a doctorate and become an expert in the field and a renowned performer. She said that had the nuns not opened the home, many transgender people would have been "begging at traffic lights."

Rose said the nuns have only been following Pope Francis' advice.

"God is [a] Father who does not disown his children, and it is our mission to make this a reality."